

**ST. BERNARD PARISH FIRE FIGHTERS  
ASSOCIATION**

STATEMENT OF

**BRIEN RUIZ  
PRESIDENT**

BEFORE THE

**HOUSE COMMITTEE ON  
HOMELAND SECURITY**

**SUBCOMMITTEE ON  
MANAGEMENT, INVESTIGATIONS, AND OVERSIGHT**

AND THE

**SUBCOMMITTEE ON  
EMERGENCY COMMUNICATIONS, PREPAREDNESS, AND  
RESPONSE**

ON

**EMPOWERING STATE AND LOCAL OFFICIALS THROUGH  
ENHANCED FEMA REGIONAL OFFICES**

JUNE 4, 2007

Thank you Chairman Cuellar, Chairman Carney, Ranking Member Dent, Ranking Member Rogers, and distinguished members of the Committee for the opportunity to testify before you today. My name is Brien Ruiz and I serve as President of the St. Bernard Parish Fire Fighters Association. I am pleased to appear before you today to discuss the response and recovery experiences of the St. Bernard Parish Fire Department in the aftermath of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

Although Hurricane Katrina ravaged the whole of the Gulf Coast, it absolutely devastated St. Bernard Parish, Louisiana. Overnight, a community of 70,000 individuals and 29,000 homes was completely covered by three to fourteen feet of water. Like fire fighters across the Gulf Coast, the local fire fighters of St. Bernard Parish were the first to respond, performing search and rescue, providing emergency medical services, and putting out fires. Even as their families and neighbors fled the community, the vast majority of our personnel stayed behind to do their jobs.

In the ensuing days and weeks, St. Bernard fire fighters worked around the clock with no contact, and no assistance, from FEMA.

We did receive support from our brothers and sisters in Louisiana and from Urban Search and Rescue Teams dispatched from Ohio, New Jersey, Georgia, and Canada. Additionally, the International Association of Fire Fighters provided medical care and counseling to responders, and housing for our families. However, apart from these sources of support, for which I am personally grateful, we were largely left to fend for ourselves. Left without viable fire houses, we commandeered residences to serve as command centers. Left without a steady supply of fuel, we filled our emergency response vehicles from local refineries. Left without needed supplies, we broke into hardware stores to obtain PVC pipe and generators. And post-Katrina, FEMA went back on a promise to pay up-front for 14 new apparatus to replace our destroyed vehicles, requiring the Parish to purchase \$4.3 million worth of equipment and submit paperwork to the Agency for reimbursement.

Although the initial response to Katrina, like any disaster, was properly at the local level, during the response to a catastrophic disaster, the federal government absolutely has a vital role to play in supporting local emergency response efforts. FEMA should have been an important resource for St. Bernard fire fighters to do their jobs, but FEMA failed the fire fighters and citizens of St. Bernard Parish miserably.

It is difficult for me to speak about the recovery of St. Bernard Parish, because although in some ways we have begun to rebuild our lives, our community as a whole has not been able to rebuild in any significant way. Of the 70,000 persons who once called St. Bernard home, only ten to fifteen thousand have returned. Our former neighbors are now scattered across the country, our fire department struggles to protect what is left of our community, and our local government lacks sufficient funding to even begin the recovery process.

Before the storm, the St. Bernard Parish fire department employed 118 fire fighters at ten fire houses. Today, we are fortunate to have 90 personnel on staff. While this may seem sufficient for a community with less than a quarter of its original population, our workload has actually increased since Katrina.

Today, we respond to more fires than ever before, fed by the large number of abandoned homes and huge quantities of garbage. This difficult job is significantly complicated by the widespread arson that occurs when some realize that setting abandoned properties and garbage ablaze alleviates the eyesore much more quickly than could any legal channels.

Additionally, St. Bernard boasts thirteen refineries, all of which present a significant fire and hazardous materials danger, and all thirteen of which remain in operation today.

Almost two years have passed since the disaster. But for St. Bernard Parish, there has, in essence, been no recovery from Hurricane Katrina.

I realize I paint a dour picture, but the picture I paint is reflective of my perspective as a Katrina responder and an active fire fighter in St. Bernard today.

I understand that the Congress has been studying failures in the federal response to Hurricane Katrina and taken concrete steps to improve the response to potential future disasters. Although I have yet to experience the impact of recent reforms, I am encouraged that they will aid in the recovery of our community and help provide a more effective federal response to future disasters.

One of the most important FEMA reforms implemented by the Congress was reestablishing and improving the FEMA Regional Offices. These offices have the potential to help ensure better coordination between FEMA, state and local governments and local emergency responders. To this day, I have yet to personally encounter anyone from FEMA in St. Bernard Parish. It is my understanding that others in my Department have spoken to FEMA officials to identify current needs, but much of this communication proved to be too little too late.

Relationships built through the Regional Offices will give FEMA an intimate understanding of a particular community's needs prior to any disaster and help ensure a cooperative relationship between the Agency and local responders, providing a more efficient and effective response.

I am also appreciative of legislation passed by the Congress and signed into law authorizing the President to establish medical monitoring programs following disasters. Although we lacked a comprehensive health monitoring program for individuals who responded to Hurricane Katrina, I personally know several responders who developed unusual medical conditions in the wake of the initial response. Future monitoring programs will permit for the treatment of potential diseases and other health conditions in responders that might not otherwise be detected.

Perhaps most importantly, I am extremely grateful for the provision included in the recently-enacted supplemental funding bill waiving the FEMA-required ten-percent local match of disaster assistance funds to rebuild our community's infrastructure. Since the storm, fire fighters have been working from trailers, purchasing our own supplies and working in conditions that would be considered substandard in any community.

Although a ten-percent match may seem small by federal standards, setting aside even this amount has been impossible given the scope of the disaster. Although vital, the needs of our community far exceed rebuilding fire houses. Much of our vital infrastructure remains unrepaired. For example, it would cost \$52 million to rebuild each of our three sewer plants. Given that this year's budget for the entirety of St. Bernard Parish is \$38 million, you can understand why this waiver is so critical to our rebuilding process. This waiver will, in large part, make our recovery possible. And for that, I thank you.

Such efforts notwithstanding, there remain a number of additional reforms that I believe would further St. Bernard's recovery and assist in future disaster responses.

As the Committee well knows, St. Bernard Parish, like many communities across America, has traditionally struggled to balance the needs of the fire service with the various other needs of the community. And although we were lucky in many ways, even pre-Katrina, we were too often forced to do more with less. For example, pre-Katrina, our Department's fire houses were tin, ground level buildings. Now most people would realize that, in a zone often hit by hurricanes, a ground level structure made of tin could not withstand extended periods of high wind and heavy rain. In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, local fire fighters were immediately expected to be running calls and performing search and rescue functions – a difficult task when your fire house is not constructed to withstand a Category 5 Hurricane.

In today's post- 9/11 world, the federal government relies ever more on local fire fighters to respond to both natural and man-made disasters in a way local departments were never intended to function. As the federal government relies more and more on local first responders, it should also take the responsibility to ensure that, in a disaster, local responders have the tools, resources and the means to fully function.

Secondly, I would urge the federal government to establish a health monitoring and treatment program for those responders who responded to Katrina. Similar monitoring programs established for 9/11 responders have detected respiratory and other health problems among fire fighters that would not have been otherwise detected. As I mentioned previously, a number of Katrina responders have unusual or unexplained symptoms in the aftermath of the response. The benefits of early detection and treatment have been well-demonstrated through the 9/11 health programs. Individuals impacted by the response to Katrina would similarly benefit from the establishment of a comprehensive monitoring and treatment program.

Lastly, I urge the Congress to consider reforms to lessen the burdens of the federal bureaucracy on devastated communities. I understand that money is not limitless, and I understand that the nation and its citizens have many conflicting needs. But when a community is completely destroyed, as was St. Bernard, the last thing local officials should need to worry is red tape and bureaucracy.

Whenever disaster strikes, no matter its scope, the professional fire fighters of St. Bernard Parish work tirelessly to do the jobs for which we were hired: to save lives and protect the public safety. Whether responding to a house fire or protecting a community of 70,000 in the wake of natural disaster, we have always made due with whatever scarce resources were available. But we cannot, and no fire fighters anywhere should be expected to do it alone.

The federal government can do so much more to help the fire service respond more effectively to future disasters. We've made some very good initial steps and I look forward to partnering with the members of this committee and this panel to build upon recent reforms and continue improving the manner by which our nation responds to large-scale emergencies.

This concludes my testimony. Thank you for your interest and attention. I am, of course, happy to answer any questions you may have.